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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the independent and combined effects of perceived parental support and social problem-solving skills on children's emotional adjustment. Thirty-six fourth- and fifth-grade children completed measures of perceived parental support, social problem-solving skills, self-perceived competence and self-worth, and recent stressful life events. It was hypothesized that both parental support and social problem-solving skills would be positively related to perceived competence and self-worth. It was expected that variables would interact to buffer the effects of stress and to facilitate children's emotional adjustment. Perceived parental support was significantly related to measures of competence and self-worth, but social problem-solving skills were not. Results have implications for the development of intervention programs. (Contains 2 tables and 12 references.) (Author)

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Perceived Parental Support as a Predictor of Children's Adjustment and Resilience

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Abstract

The present study investigated the independent and combined effects of perceived parental support and social problem-solving skills on children's emotional adjustment. Thirty-six fourth- and fifth-grade children completed measures of perceived parental support, social problem-solving skills, self-perceived competence and self-worth, and recent stressful life events. It was hypothesized that both parental support and social problem-solving skills would be positively related to perceived competence and self-worth. It was expected that variables would interact to buffer the effects of stress and to facilitate children's emotional adjustment. Perceived parental support was significantly related to measures of competence and self-worth, but social problem-solving skills were not. Results have implications for the development of intervention programs.

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Perceived Parental Support as a Predictor of Children's Adjustment and Resilience

Perceived parental support, how much children feel loved and cared for by their parents (and extended family), is an example of esteem support, which has been found to help protect children from the effects of high life stress (Compas, 1987; Garmezy, 1981). Social problem-solving skill, the ability to identify interpersonal problems, generate alternative solutions, and choose the most effective response, has been studied as an internal coping resource which can lead to positive behavioral adjustment and competent peer relations in the face of stress (Dubow & Tisak, 1989; Richard & Dodge, 1982; Spivack, Platt & Shure, 1976).

The present study investigated the independent and combined contributions of perceived parental support and social problem-solving skills to children's emotional adjustment, and further, tested their roles as moderators of the effects of stress. Only modest to moderate correlations between cumulative life events and maladjustment have been found, suggesting that the risk and extent of children's maladjustment varies greatly depending on environmental and individual differences between children (Compas, 1987).

Method

Subjects

Fourth- and fifth-grade children in a suburban, socioeconomically diverse elementary school were asked to take home to their parents a consent form explaining the study. A total of 36 children (22%), 17 fourth-graders and 19 fifth-graders, returned consent forms to participate. The sample consisted of 19 boys and 17 girls, and ranged in age from 8.11 to 12.6 years old. Sixty-seven percent of the sample were Caucasian (n = 24), 25% were African-American (n = 9), and 8.3% were Asian (n = 3).

Children individually completed four self-report measures in two sessions during lunch recess at school or in one session at home. All measures were read aloud for each child by the examiner.

Measures

The Parental Acceptance and Support Measure (Rabiner, Keane, & MacKinnon-Lewis,1993) is a 15 item measure of children's perceived parental support. Children rate aspects of their relationships with their parents. The question format was modified from "my parents..." to "the adults in my family...." because many children may have been receiving support from guardians and extended family members. Rabiner et al. (1993) reported the internal consistency to be .88, and provided evidence of adequate validity.

The Children's Action Tendency Scale (CATS) (Deluty, 1981) measures social problem-solving skills with hypothetical open-ended vignettes. Five of the original 13 CATS vignettes were chosen for this study because they dealt specifically with peer conflicts and represented a variety of situations. A composite score, taking into account both the number of solutions and their effectiveness ratings, was used in the data analysis, as suggested by Dubow and Tisak (1989).

The Life Events Checklist (Sandler & Block, 1979) is a 32 item checklist measuring the number of recent stressful events a child has experienced in the past six months. This measure was developed for use with elementary school children. Sandler and Block (1979) reported modest to good correlations (.41-.68) between the number of stressful life events and teacher-rated maladjustment variables.

The Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985) measures perceived competence and self-worth. Children reported how they see themselves in five specific domains and how well they like themselves on an independent subscale of global self-worth. Of interest to the present study were the domains of Scholastic Competence,

Social Acceptance, and Behavioral Conduct. High internal consistencies, factorial validity, and good discriminant and construct validity are reported in the test manual (Harter, 1985).

Results

Pearson product-moment correlations and multiple regression analyses were conducted. Interrater reliability was good in that Pearson correlations of a trained rater's scores and those of the criterion judge were r = .98 for both the number of social problem-solving solutions and solution effectiveness in twenty subjects.

Perceived parental support was significantly positively related to scores on the global self-worth subscale and to all five domains of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985), including scholastic competence, social acceptance, and behavioral conduct (see Table 1).

Correlations of the social problem-solving composite score with self-worth and with perceived social acceptance were in the expected direction, but did not reach statistical significance.

Multiple regression analyses revealed that perceived parental support significantly contributed to the variance in school competence (R = .51, R^2 = .26, $F(1,34) = 12.5$, p = .001), behavioral competence (R = .41, R^2 = .17, $F(1,34) = 6.97$, p = .01) and self-worth (R = .35, R^2 = .13, $F(1,34) = 4.92$, p = .03) when stressful events were entered as the first step of the regression equation. This finding suggests that parental support facilitates competent adjustment regardless of children's level of stress. Interactions between stress and parental support were generally not found to be significant. These findings are consistent with a main effect rather than a buffering effect of support.

A significant interaction was found between life stress and parental support for the prediction of perceived social acceptance (see Table 2). However, analysis of the

cell means indicated that the interaction was not in the expected direction. Results of *t*-tests indicated that for children with high life stress, those reporting low parental support felt more socially accepted than children reporting high parental support.

Social problem-solving skills and the combination of the two protective factors did not significantly contribute to the prediction of adjustment.

Discussion

The present study found that perceived parental support was significantly related to children's self-perceived competence and self-worth. These results suggest that perceived support of an adult in the family may significantly contribute to children's emotional well being and may also protect them from the negative sequellae of cumulative stressful life events. These findings are consistent with previous studies (e.g. Harter, 1985; Stocker, 1994) and support the use of children's self-reported perceptions of their parents as valid and useful information in the study of childhood coping and adjustment. Only recently have measures of children's perceived parental support, rather than parental reports, been utilized in research (e.g. Dubow & Ullman, 1989; Quamma & Greenberg, 1994; Stocker, 1994).

The results did not support the hypothesis that social problem-solving skills are related to emotional adjustment. Previous studies have demonstrated links between social problem-solving skills and behavioral adjustment (Dubow & Tisak, 1989; Richard & Dodge, 1982), but few have investigated the relationship between social problem-solving skills and emotional adjustment.

The findings of the present study highlight the importance of supportive parent-child relationships regardless of children's level of stress. Findings have implications for intervention. Many current intervention programs focus on teaching children social problem-solving skills. An important supplement to these programs may involve

teaching adults how to provide their children with valuable esteem support. Future research could yield a more clear understanding of which parental behaviors are perceived by children as most supportive, and how perceived parental support facilitates children's positive adjustment.

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Table 1. *Pearson Product-Moment Correlations for Predictor and Criterion Variables.*

	Self-Perceived Competence Scale for Children			
	Social Acceptance	School Competence	Behavioral Competence	Self-Worth
Parental Support	.31*	.52***	.41**	.36*
Social Problem-Solving[a]	.23	.11	.19	.20

[a]Composite score from the problem-solving task.

*p<.05, one tailed test, **p<.01, one tailed test, ***p<.001, one tailed test

Table 2. *Regression Analysis of Negative Life Events and Parental Support on Self-Perceived Social Acceptance.*

Predictor variables	Criterion Variables	R	R^2 change	F change	p
negative life events	perceived social acceptance	.163	.026	0.93	.34
parental support	perceived social acceptance	.354	.098	3.73	.06
negative events x parental support	perceived social acceptance	.560	.188	8.80	.005

Note: N=36.